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Re-reading Marginality in Kiran Nagarkar's Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three

Abstract: This paper is an attempt that has been made to study the issues of marginality in Kiran Nagarkar's Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three with reference to the discourses of history and subjectivity. The close examination of Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three reveals that the articulations of myriad socio-historical discourses and practices, affecting the lives of the people of his society. The shifting terrains of his novel enable Nagarkar to focus on a broad range of anomalies and wrongs incurred at the local, the national and the global level. His novel also attacks the socio-linguistically coded wrongs that camouflage hierarchy, discrimination, deprivation and dehumanization. Nagarkar foregrounds various cultural issues and problems pertaining to class, caste, gender, religion, power, violence and so on, hampering people's real life practices and aggravating their situations.

Keywords: Marginality, Dehumanization, Caste, Class, Gender.

Kiran Nagarkar is one of the most significant, wide-ranging, provocative and living writer in India. It would not be an exaggeration to consider Nagarkar as one of the best recognized and most brilliant of Indian English novelists. His works are attempts to make formulations of the tragedy and alienation existence unleashed by the socio-historical conditions of post-colonial India. With a sense of ideological commitment and concern, his works are blistering criticism of contemporary social realities. An ideologue of modernity, his writings exhibit a denouncement of the religious-ideological militancy and extremist surging in Indian society. With an emphasis on the religious, linguistic, social and economic problems and issues, and giving voice to the deprived and marginalized sections of Indian society are the central motivations of Nagarkar's oeuvre.

Nagarkar's seminal novel *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three* is primarily concerned with the articulation of power relations and hierarchies - has been critically examined. It has been portrayed that the novel's protagonist, Kushank Purandre and various other characters representing various sections of their society has been marginalized by the dominant culture. In *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three*, the representation and misrepresentation of the issues pertaining to religion, caste, class, and gender are at the gist of Nagarkar's commitment with the cultural-politics and the discontents of culture.

The novel, *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three*, set in post independent Maharashtra, revolves around the protagonist Kushank Purandre, an unpublished author, dwelling in a Mumbai chawl, who enjoys the generosity and a bunch of friends, lovers and relatives. In the novel, Kushank is portrayed not only as a victim of the social systems and situations but also as a spectator to the predicament, desperation and struggle of a batch of characters as wives, daughters, untouchables, labourers, fugitives and sufferers of police atrocities. In the absence

of a fully coherent and linear narrative - ruptured by flashbacks and the juxtapositions of scenes - readers are forced to see Kushank as a unifying factor.

Nagarkar's *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three* suggests a pressing urgency for a fresh look of structural transformations of gender roles, ideologies, identities and relations, with a view to improve and better women's conditions. The story opens with a very shocking act of humiliation and violence:

He came home drunk again. Like every other day, Pratibha shut the door quickly after him. Whatever happened, however angry, terrified hopeless she felt, she would always shut the neighbours out of it all. The same of it must be contained within these four walls, always...Then it is Pratibha's turn. He'd hit her whenever he flew into a rage, with whatever came to hand, wherever he could lay his blows. (1)

The above paragraph of the novel describes an arrogant and male-chauvinist husband, Ajit's acts of humiliation and beating of his wife Pratibha, despite her's being a very homely and submissive. Ajit meets out the similar treatment to her mother also. Both the women remain silent onlookers, plundered of their dignity and rights in their own home. Being deeply entrenched into the historically and socially constructed artificial hierarchy of patriarchy, Ajit considers his birth right to treat the women abusively and brutally. And the home wherein the women - wife and mother - have to live, instead of providing safety and security to them, has turned into a confined space of cruelty and abuse. Instead of treating Pratibha as a dignified human being and a citizen with equal human rights, Ajit intoxicated with the attitude of macho - masculinity, considers his wife as a sub-human household labourer with a body to satisfy his adaptations. To her husband, Pratibha is a property.

Being fed up with her the violent treatment meted out to her by Ajit, Pratibha raises her protesting voice, "you hit me once more and I'll set fire to myself. I'm fed up. I've had

enough. I don't want to live any more". (1) Stung with her threat, Ajit reacts quite hideously: "so who's stopping you, you stupid bitch? Go on and do if you have the fucking guts. What are you waiting for?" (2). At her husband's provocation and abatement, Pratibha poured kerosene over herself and lit the fire. Soon she is engulfed by red-flames and her body is very badly burnt. But it is too late before the wisdom dawned upon her and she realized her folly, before she lost consciousness, before they took her to the hospital, before the police arrived. She hung on to the doctor's arm with all her strength.

Pratibha's identity is deeply grounded in Indian attitude towards marriage and motherhood. She sees a woman's value in taking care of her children and her duty in adapting to her husband. That is why she even goes to the extent of forgiving her incriminating husband, ignoring the reality that it is he who is liable for her current miserable state of affairs. "Before she went into a comma" (5) and eventually died, "she made a statement that she had tried to commit suicide because of an incurable illness" (5). Commenting on self-annihilating individuality of Indian woman, Veena Das in "Transactions in the Construction of Pain," writes:

Rather than bearing a witness to the disorder they had been subjected to the metaphor they used is a woman drinking the poison and keeping it within her: just as a woman's body is made so that she can hide the faults of her husband deep within her, so she can drink all the pain - take the stance of silence. (85)

This remark made Das is quiet befitting in the case of Pratibha. Kushank is sent to bring in Ajit's mother, who is living with her brother away from her son. She is unaware of her daughter's-in-law catastrophic destiny. When Kushank informs her of Pratibha's demise, she shows no shock and remorse. Instead she believes that it is Pratibha who creates rift between her and Ajit, her son. The mother believes that Pratibha's unnatural and untimely demise is a

God's reprisal on her as Pratibha is a main cause of her dilemmas and hardships. She even refuses to return back home to mourn Pratibha's death.

As far as Ajit's mother's mental disposition is concerned, she is totally unaware of her acculturation into the patriarchal dogma, which has turned her blind-folded to find any indiscretion in her son. On the contradiction, she cherishes an extreme sense of enmity towards Pratibha and thinks that Pratibha has had a negative influence upon her son. Ajit could have become totally a better and different person had his mother kept a check and vigil on his mental evolution, so that the patriarchal mores planted in him had not taken such a bad and cruel shape. It is to be observed that Ajit's mother herself being impoverished of all the cultural resources and abundances, that capacitate subjectivity, she ought to depend up on her brother for her existence if not on her son. Accordingly their gendered status in the society, they - both Pratibha and her mother-in-law - have come to get a marginalized position.

If the malfunctioning of patriarchal ideology renders wives and mothers as peripheral and insignificant, it is equally incapacitating, constraining and insidious in the case of daughters as well. Mr. Kathavte, called "Bhau" by his family members, lives in a Mumbai chawl in the neighbourhood of Kushank. When Mrs. Kathavte intervenes and begs her husband to stop whipping their daughters, she also "got her share" (26). Earlier, one of his daughters, Rekha, fainted because of extended physical abuse, Mr. Kathavte states that "she is shaming" (27). Mr. Kathavte would be completely unmindful of the reality that "the yelling and screaming" (27) resulting from his act of beating his daughters, might be annoying his neighbours. Mr. Kathavte's sons received altogether different treatment from their father. Their empowered gendered status by righteousness of being sons enables them to raise their voice against their father's dictatorial and browbeating attitude.

Nagarkar's narrative draws our attention towards the dehumanizing practice of the caste structure and its incompatibility with democratic values. Nagarkar by highlighting the

distorted representation (the plight) of the impoverished section of his society urges for a fundamental need of structural change in the social order and noticeable change in the outlook toward the Dalits. And for this, the onus lies largely on the powerful, especially the upper caste actors. As a social realist novelist, Nagarkar has a key concern and empathy for the suppressed and the exploited. Highlighting the plight in terms of death, sickness, starvation and desolation of the marginalized, is at the gist of the narrative of the novel. As social beings, Kushank and co-characters of the texts suffer exorbitantly due to their culturally and materially deprived class positions. Their lives are nothing less than big rounds of sordidness, poverty and degradation from the birth to the death. Scanty access to the material resources and amenities constrain their lives.

Majority of the characters including the protagonist, Kushank suffer from multiple deprivations and incapability such as quality-education, good health and a fairly ideal standard of living. They are under the constant pressures of economic insecurities, and precarious livelihoods, strained social relations and skewed gender relations. They are frequently abused and exploited by those in power such as land-lords and the police. Jobless Kushank tried his hands at various occupations. Kushank's humble economic background is further revealed by the father of Chandini, who tells Chandini that Kushank's aunt indulges into prostitution to earn her livelihood. Chandini's father considers Kushank almost a street brat. Keeping in view, the disadvantageous socio-economic condition of Kushank, he dissuades his daughter Chandini to marry Kushank, saying that the relations of intimacy between the married couples can not last long, if they are not supported by a strong financial security. With an effort to convince his daughter, he says that it is a puppy love.

Keeping in view his pathetic economic conditions, Kushank himself could not commit to Chandini for the marriage, despite Chandini's offer to wait till the both start earning. Prachiniti episode in the very early chapters of the novel, *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three*, is

another harrowing account of suffering caused by penury. Very intimate to Kushank, Prachiniti married to a painter, Shatlaj and the mother of little Arshad, is admitted in a municipal hospital. "If Prachinit had been taken to hospital ten months earlier, she might have lived another couple of years" (34) Prachiniti's prolonged and insufferable ailment coupled with her family's utter state of destitution, hurts Kushank immensely, despite his own being in a state of privation. "Shatlaj tried to sell his paintings. Tutored others in painting. And then sold his colours and easel too. To buy Prachiniti's medicine" (34). Finally Prachinit and her husband Shatlaj look up to Kushank for the monetary help to meet the hospital expenses and contact Kushank for the same. Kushank still efforts to arrange the money and asks his relatives and friends but only to meet his dismay. His rich but callous friends remain unmoved. Hunger and poverty at times become a breeding ground of humiliation and shame. The poor class subject position affects access to esteem or respect from others. It also affects our relationship with others and shows how people are valued in this situation. It has been noticed that life-chances and accomplishments are seriously affected by the lottery of the birth-class. In the context of the novel, Kushank recalls an incident that occurred to him in the early part of his life, when he is heaped with humiliation.

Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three is a representation of the marginalized and suppressed portions of the post-independent Indian/Maharashtrian society. It is a disturbing narrative of struggle for survival in a world abounding in poverty, degradation, crime, violence hopelessness and distorted human relations. The novel views culture as fundamentally and inseparably interlinked to power, identity, subjectivity and history. The cultural tiers of class, caste, religion, gender and have serious impacts on our subjectivities. Class, caste, gender and religion suppression prevail in a social set-up as much through the institutions of culture, family, religious and educational institutions and media as through the oppressive and uncontrollable forces of the police and other state agencies.

Nagarkar in his writings and especially in *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three* have done an admirable social enrichment by fighting for the cause of humanity, human welfare and social justice. Nagarkar as a writer for the people assails the constituted wrongs done to the poor. This novel dwells deep into the lowest strata of his society and lampoons the rich and the affluent ones. Nagarkar also draws our attention to the fact that there can be no alleviation of human suffering without the restoration of human dignity to the common people and no positive change can be wrought in a society without realizing the value of respecting the different, the other.

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